

# SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENTS

The **subject** of a clause determines the form of a **verb**.

| \_\_\_\_\_ |



**subjects and verbs must agree in person (*I, we, you, he, she, it, they*) and number (*singular or plural*)**

Determining subject-verb agreement (SVA) is simply a matter of identifying the subject and verb in the sentence, and making sure they agree in person and number. For example, what are the subjects and verbs in the following sentences? What is the *person* in the sentence? Should the verb be *singular* or *plural*?

- My brother works as an accountant.
- Jonathon likes to ride his bike.
- The two women attend nursing school.
- My sister teaches English.
- Doug and Tim work at the prison.

As you already know, *to be*, *to have*, and *to do* are irregular. Be attentive when constructing sentences with these verbs.

Simple Present		Simple Past	
I am you are he/she/it is	we are you are they are	I was you were she/he/it is	we were you were they were
I have you have he/she/it has	we have you have they have	I had you had he/she/it had	we had you had they had
I do you do he/she/it does	we do you do they do	I did you did he/she/it did	we did you did they did

For regular verbs, making the subject and verb agree is simply a matter of figuring out whether your subject is singular or plural – whether the verb needs an “s” or not. What are the subjects and verbs in the following sentences? What is the *person*? Are the subjects *singular* or *plural*?

Our department subscribes to a number of academic journals.

Other departments subscribe to popular magazines as well.

Jonathon hates mushrooms on his pizza.

However, I like mushrooms on my pizza.

The easiest way to check for errors is to isolate the subject and verb in each sentence and put them side by side to be sure they agree. You should do this in the editing phase of your writing process. And you should check EVERY sentence!

## Troublesome Subjects

**There as a Subject.** In these cases, the verb agrees with the noun in the predicate.

For example:                There is a cat sitting on the counter.  
                                      There are four cars in the driveway.  
                                      There is a TV in the living room.  
                                      There are too many stoplights on this road.

*Using the following words, create sentences with correct subject-verb agreements with “there” as a subject.*

There / be / phone book / table.

There / be / books / bookshelf.

There / be / clothes / hanging / closet

There / be / meeting / conference room

There / be / fork / drawer

**Indefinite Pronouns as Subjects.** The singular indefinite pronouns always take a singular verb. The plural indefinite pronouns always take a plural verb. A few indefinite pronouns take a singular or plural verb, depending on the meaning.

Singular indefinite pronouns:        *another, anybody, anyone, anything, each, either, everybody, everyone, everything, less, little, much, neither, nobody, no one, nothing, one, other, somebody, someone, something.*

I don't know where everyone is right now.  
Can somebody shut the door please?  
I have tried everything; nothing works!

Plural indefinite pronouns:        *both, few, fewer, many, others, several*

Many go to Florida every year for the winter.  
Both are traveling by plane.  
Few enjoy the TV show *Little Britain*.  
Several enjoy British humor.

Singular or plural:                *all, any, more, most, none, some, such*

I found a lot of sources, but none are helpful to my research.  
You know what they say about money: more is always better!  
Not everyone is here yet; some are coming later.

*Fill in the correct form of the verb in the blank spaces below, making the verbs agree with the indefinite pronouns.*

Many \_\_\_\_\_ (to visit) Ottawa every year for the Winterlude Festival.

Anyone who \_\_\_\_\_ (to travel) there will find that Ottawa is a very clean, well-kept city.

Most \_\_\_\_\_ (to find) Ottawa to be extremely cold in the winter months.

During the Winterlude Festival, visitors will notice that everyone \_\_\_\_\_ (to go) skating on the Rideau Canal.

## Unusual Singular or Plural Forms.

Some English words have plural forms that don't end in "s," so they are easy to miss. A dictionary will help you to identify these. Here are some common words that have an irregular plural form:

criterion/criteria	appendix/appendices	phenomenon/phenomena	radius/radii	nucleus/nuclei	syllabus/syllabi
focus/foci	fungus/fungi	alumnus/alumni	crisis/crises	thesis/theses	index/indices
man/men	woman/women	goose/geese	foot/feet	tooth/teeth	child/children
octopus/octopii	cactus/cacti	mouse/mice	curriculum /curricula	memorandum /memoranda	datum/data

*Fill in the correct form of the verb in the sentences below, making sure the verb agrees with the subject.*

One criterion for my paper \_\_\_\_\_ (to be) the quality of my thesis statement.

The grading criteria for our essays \_\_\_\_\_ (to include) content, purpose, organization, and composition.

The financial crisis \_\_\_\_\_ (to be) causing problems for many Americans who are homeowners.

Financial crises \_\_\_\_\_ (to be) now happening in markets all over the world.

The WRA curriculum \_\_\_\_\_ (to require) students to write 6,000 words during the semester.

Various university-level curricula \_\_\_\_\_ (to require) students to write four to seven papers in an introductory writing course.

A few nouns have only a plural form. These use a plural verb.

police	people	clothes	shorts	scissors	trousers/pants
tweezers	congratulations	pyjamas	glasses	jeans	pliers

The pliers are on the workbench in the garage.

My pajamas are on the floor in my closet.

My tweezers were stolen.

Congratulations are appropriate on graduation day.

Other nouns have only a plural form, but use a singular verb.

economics	mathematics	statistics	dollars	news	gymnastics
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The news is on at six.

Fifty dollars is barely enough to fill up your car these days.

Gymnastics is a very graceful sport.

Statistics is a difficult course.

Some nouns have only a plural form, but making them a pair makes them countable. These use a plural verb.

glasses	pants	scissors	shoes	stockings	tweezers
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My glasses are dirty.

These scissors are bent.

This pair of glasses is broken.

This pair of scissors is dull.

A few nouns have only one spelling for singular and plural. These use the singular verb when the meaning is singular and a plural verb when the meaning is plural.

fish/fish	deer/deer	sheep/sheep	species/species	series/series	aircraft/aircraft
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A deer ran across the road.

Deer gathered in my backyard near the edge of the forest.

This species is extinct.

The fish swam around in the pond.

Some uncountable nouns have no plural form and are used with singular verbs.

information	research	advice	luggage	rain	oil
water	feedback	baggage	media	snow	counsel

The research is insightful.

My luggage never made it onto the airplane.

Oil is the cause of many modern conflicts.

Her information is biased.

**Coordinated Subjects.** When a subject has two or more equal parts joined by *and* or *or* / *nor*, it is called a *coordinated subject* or *compound subject*.

AND: If the noun phrases (singular or plural) are joined with *and*, use a plural form.

The forks and knives are in the drawer on the right.  
The shoes and coats are in the closet by the front door.  
The dog and cat are on the porch.

OR/NOR: If two singular noun phrases are joined with *or* / *nor*, use a singular verb.

Jonathon or Melissa is going to write the story about the new library.  
Neither a car or truck is going to make it up that muddy driveway.

If two plural nouns phrases are joined with *or* / *nor*, use a plural verb.

Neither the students or tutors work hard enough on subject-verb agreements.  
Neither the students nor tutors want to think about subject-verb agreements anymore.

If a plural noun is joined to a singular noun with AND or OR/NOR, some style guides suggest making the verb agree with the closest noun.

The teacher or students want to get out of class early today.  
The dog and the cats like to run around the backyard.

(Most professional writers suggest avoiding this kind of sentence altogether, which is the easiest way to avoid confusion and making an error.)

**Prepositional Phrases in Subjects.** The main thing to remember in these kinds of phrases is the *main noun*. The verb must agree with the main noun only.

Some subject noun phrases include prepositional phrases after the main noun. Identify the main noun in these sentences.

The writing class for ESL students meets three times a week.

The likelihood of this student passing ESL 220 is not good.

The diagnostic exam for incoming ESL students takes about 45 minutes.

Partitive expressions (some of the..., three of the..., etc.) refer to a part or quantity of the main noun. Subject-verb agreement depends on whether the noun is count or noncount. Noncount and singular nouns use singular verbs.

Some of the classrooms have computers and projectors in them.

All MSU students are issued an ID card when they arrive on campus.

Five of the questions on the test are trick questions.